

## **The Sin Woman Trailer (1921)**

FEATURE PRODUCTION COMPANY: George Backer Film Corporation. DIRECTOR: George W. Lederer. WRITERS: Edward Corbett and Herbert Hall Winslow. PHOTOGRAPHERS: H.E. Butler and Alfred Moses. CAST: Irene Fenwick (Grace Penrose). RUNNING TIME: 96 seconds.

In cinema, more significantly in silent cinema, the femme fatale's game of seduction is plainly visual. The vamp is always portrayed as the immoral mysterious woman whose sole interest lies in enticing wealthy family men. When her victim is tamed, the vamp chooses a new male prey, so that her exciting game may resume more intensively each time.<sup>1</sup> On the narrative level, *The Sin Woman*, the American melodrama, released in the United States in April 1917 and whose 1921 Australian film trailer the National Film Preservation Foundation recently repatriated and restored, does not depart much from this type of plot and characterization.<sup>2</sup>

Film reviews and commercial advertisements report that *The Baby Vampire*, the title by which *The Sin Woman* was better known in "blasé circles," opened with a prologue focused on some of the most notable ancestors of the vamp lady, such as Eve and Mary Magdalene. This introduction meant to set the thematic mood before the film switched gears and moved to the most interesting part, the modern story.<sup>3</sup> The film tells of the mischief and malice of a young vamp, Grace Penrose, to the detriment of two men, the bachelor George Morgan and the married man John Winthrop. Both men fall victim to the charm of "this mystic, winsome, ever-young, ageless sin woman."<sup>4</sup> However, in the end both leave her to go back to their families, while the revolted townspeople, who do not accept her despicable conduct, tar and feather her.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the reviews are divided over whether the film was a success, but all agree on the exceptional performance of the tri-star cast (Irene Fenwick, Reine Davies, and Clifford Bruce) and in particular on Fenwick's delightful and charming acting.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, all praise the cinematography. They define the movie as a "seven-part drama that is both an imposing and dramatic spectacle and a social character study," a "play that is an insight into a helpless

woman's unconscious offending," and "not a sex play but a study of human life and love."<sup>7</sup> Such opposite definitions resonate not so much with the title of the film and its sinful and predictable narrative but with the visual content of the trailer.

Despite its bold content, the movie was made for general screenings in Australia. The film premiered in Sydney Town Hall and ultimately, it traveled all over the country.<sup>8</sup> The trailer opens with three title cards that introduce the title of the film, suggest the origin of the material being shown, the location of its upcoming screenings, and ends with the name of the main female character and those of its main actors. According to recent standards, the trailer is not a montage of the most significant moments in the film; rather, it seems to be an entire sequence extrapolated from the film, which likely is the one that introduces the vamp to the audience. The sequence does not foreground or set the premises of the plot, but simply seduces the male audience in the same way a vamp lady would seduce her victims. However, it is significant that the sequence, deemed extremely erotic for the early 1920s, could be in reality the metaphorical attempt on the woman's part to wash away her sinful reputation by taking a bath. Because of such daring images, the movie was screened in the United States only for an adult audience and released by special permit.<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note how *Motion Picture News* describes some audiences' reactions to Grace's morning disrobing and the subsequent unseen shower scene: "The effect such a scene has on an audience is rather funny. Some grab their hats in anticipation of making a hasty exit, while others sit with eyes riveted on the screen."<sup>10</sup>

The theaters in which the film was shown, and people reacted so blatantly, were certainly not place[s] for family reunions, but as an ad in *Variety* showed, despite the displayed or suggested female nudity and the perverse plot, the National Board of Review passed the film.<sup>11</sup> The magnetism of this sequence is unquestionable, especially considering its effect in such a

short trailer, but if the sequence was really too scandalous, it is reasonable to question why the film easily passed censorship. An answer can be found with a closer look at the trailer whose focus is not the woman and her misbehavior, but the human condition of a young rich female—“daughter of heredity,” as the intertitle points out—who is confined in the stereotypical role of the vamp. Thus, it is valuable to redirect attention to the most prominent elements of the trailer, which are not the woman or what she represents but the space and its cinematic reconstruction.<sup>12</sup>

The space of Grace Penrose’s house (mainly its exterior facade, bedroom, and bathroom) is fragmented and only slowly revealed. An establishing shot, which comes after three other shots of the woman’s bedroom, proves the dominating role played by the *mise-en-scène*. An imposing wooden bed frame, with its two columns, as well as the two steps that lead to the bed, introduces a privileged and restricted zone of her house. This restricted zone shows an Asian touch with its two Chinese vases and the little Buddha statue on display, not to mention Grace’s Asian maid. Neither the images in the trailer nor any other secondary source provides an explanation for this choice, but the exoticism or orientalism that such props convey align them with the sumptuous rugs on the floor, the embroidered pillow lying on the decorated blanket on the bed, and the velvet curtains. All these elements dominate the space in the repeated frontal long shot of the bedroom, but the bed is always in the center of the frame. It is no accident, though, that what remains barely perceived in the bedroom is the little birdcage that Grace inspects as she gets up. The birdcage hanging from the ceiling is at the top right of the frame. The entire human condition of the vamp resides in this detail, and the definitions of the film that appeared in the trade press find justification in it. Just like the little bird in the cage, Grace lives in a building surrounded by high fences, as the opening establishing shot of the trailer shows. She lives a human condition that is an inescapable trap.

The space of the house becomes even more complex to read when she moves from the bedroom to the bathroom. The trajectory of the characters' movement suggests that the bathroom is offscreen to the left of the bedroom. Moreover, the parallel editing that connects the Western movements of Grace and her maid with the work of the Asian maid in the bathroom indicates that both Grace and the maid are heading there. Grace and the Western maid are framed from the back, as they enter this space, while the Asian maid welcomes them in the doorway. However, the framing implies an opposite and impossible location for the bathroom. Two disorienting elements prove that this framing is unrealistic. First, a velvet curtain that resembles the one decorating the bed frame surrounds the shot, as if the camera were placed on the bed, and second, in the long shot of the bathroom entrance, the Buddha statue, which in the establishing shot of the bedroom is on the right of the bed, is clearly visible. Then, according to these coordinates, the bathroom is to the right of the bedroom, and the editing of the sequence proves to be incoherent.<sup>13</sup> What is striking in this disorienting spatial representation is that what matters about the space is not its organization and depth. In fact, the depth of space is flattened to enhance Grace's tragic destiny of entrapment in private and confined areas, be they her building, her apartment, her bed, the shower, or simply a doorway. She is not free despite the fact that her financial and social independence identifies her as the "New Woman." In fact, as Sumiko Higashi writes, "the 'New Woman' was, on the one hand, a sexual playmate and herself a commodity and, on the other, a sentimental heroine adhering to an outmoded Victorian legacy. The emphasis on self-theatricalization informing discourse on these contrasting models of femininity ultimately served to validate consumption rather than sexual equality or freedom."<sup>14</sup> It is precisely in the theatricalization of her double identity as a woman that her freedom gets lost. If her doom is read in these terms, then the suggested nakedness, which the trailer and likely

the film as well entirely avoid, loses its significance and distributors and exhibitors do not fear its process of national and international distribution and exhibition anymore.<sup>15</sup>

—Simonetta Menossi

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## Notes

1. Annette Kuhn and Susannah Radstone. *Women in Film: An International Guide*. (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1991), 409.
2. The precise release date remains uncertain. I have tried to find the release date of the film in *Moving Picture World* and *Motion Picture News*, but the film is never mentioned along with the other films released at the beginning of April 1917. According to the ads published in *Variety* and *Motion Picture News* respectively on April 6 and 7, 1917, by the last week of April 1917, the film was ready to be distributed nationally and internationally. Thus, it may be assumed that the film was released during the second week of April 1917 or shortly after that. *Variety*, April 6, 1917, 19. *Motion Picture News*, April 7, 2134. Information about the distribution company was found in “Irene Fenwick and Clifford Bruce in ‘The Sin Woman,’” *Hamilton Evening Journal*, September 5, 1917, 4.
3. *Piqua Daily Leader Dispatch*, September 17, 1917, 8.
4. Description of Grace’s charm comes from direct quotation of the ad that appeared in *Variety*, April 6, 1917, 19. It is important to underline that the content of all the film ads is exclusively verbal; no pictures or other images are displayed.

5. The summary of the plot has been retrieved from American Film Catalogue. A detail worth mentioning is that the name of the female character is Grace Penrose, but one of the reviews reports the name, as being Ruth. "Strand—"The Sin Woman,"" *Syracuse Herald*, July 22, 1917, 8.
6. Lederer was married to Reine Davies, who played Beth Winthrop, the cheated wife, in the film.
7. The quotations come respectively from *Olean Evening Herald*, September 15, 1917, 19; *Kingston Daily Freeman*, January 4, 1918, 14; and *Middletown Daily Times Press*, April, 1, 1918, 8.
8. Brooks Boliek, "Lost Silent Films Dug Up Down Under: Rare Films Show Hollywood's Influence Goes Back a Century," *Calgary Herald*, April 26, 2008, <http://www.canada.com/calgaryherald/news/entertainment/story.html?id=4dca9b41-92c6-4565-81d9-9779c54c098b>.
9. "The Sin Woman," *Chicago Defender*, September 22, 1917, 4.
10. *Motion Picture News*, April 7, 1917, 2134.
11. The quotation comes from Peter Milne, "The Sin Woman," *Motion Picture News*, April 21, 1917, 2520. Information about censorship and the film were found in *Variety*, April 6, 1917, 19 and "The Sin Woman," *Dramatic Mirror*, April 14, 1917, 28.
12. Unfortunately, it is not possible to verify if the Australian trailer was the same as the one released in the United States, but if the two trailers were different, then such a difference might explain, or at least determine, how the film easily passed censorship.
13. Even though the movements and performance of the actors as well as the framing in the trailer suggest a disorienting space, it must be acknowledged that there is the possibility that some were cut out of the sequence in question, thus producing spatial incoherence in the trailer.
14. Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 165.
15. Mapping the distribution and exhibition of *The Sin Woman* in the United States cannot be considered a completely accurate study without a thorough analysis of most of the film advertising campaigns that appeared in national and local newspapers between 1917 and 1918; research on the material at disposal shows that the film was certainly distributed in North America (the United States and Canada) and that the entire foreign rights were sold; thus, the film was most certainly distributed in Australia. As far as the American film market a great number of ads in local newspapers publicized the film in the Midwest area (Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa) and in New York between June 22, 1917, and April 30, 1918, which means more than a year after its first national release. The amount of ads and articles about the film published in this geographical area, though, does not exclude that the film was distributed and well received with the same enthusiasm in other states of the country. So the film was not meant to be a meteor on the cinema bills in the United States or elsewhere, but it ended up becoming a successful "legitimate gamble" whose moral and meaning are contained in the 1921 Australian trailer.